

ARMINIUS VS. CALVIN

July 26, 1999 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, wayoflife.org, fbns@wayoflife.org) - James Arminius (1560-1609) was a brilliant and godly Dutch theologian who opposed John Calvin's doctrines of unconditional predestination, limited atonement, and irresistible grace, and who stood for universal salvation for all that come to God through Jesus Christ. We do not follow Arminius nor do we agree with all of his positions. He was a fallible man and he was influenced by some of the errors of his day; and his followers took his theology even farther away from the Bible. We do believe, though, that Arminius was much closer to biblical truth than John Calvin.

The following overview of Arminius's life and teaching is taken partly from two cyclopedia sets in my library: M'Clintock and Strong's Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature of 1895 and the New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge of 1909.

Arminius was born in Oudewater, Holland. In 1582, at age 22, he began studies in Geneva, which was the center for John Calvin's reformed theology. Upon Calvin's death in 1564, Theodore Beza had assumed leadership and promoted Calvinistic theology. Arminius had the reputation of "a spotless Christian consistency" and "as a preacher he was exceedingly popular; in sweetness of voice, ardor of manner, and finish of style, he was distinguished above all his contemporaries." His zeal was to base his views strictly upon the Bible, and he could not countenance error. He was often involved in debates with philosophers and teachers such as the followers of Aristotle, Augustine, and Calvin. Though he was willing to pursue doctrinal controversy, the mean-spiritedness and petty jealousy that often characterized his opponents did not mar his life.

His zeal for the truth won him many enemies. In 1586, he traveled to Rome, and while there, vicious rumors were spread in Geneva that he had kissed the pope's slipper and had become a Roman Catholic. These slanders were answered after his return from Italy. Arminius said he "he saw at Rome a mystery of iniquity much more foul than he had ever imagined." He was ordained to the Protestant ministry at Amsterdam in 1588. In 1603, he was falsely charged with being a Pelagian, which is the denial that men are condemned sinners because of Adam's fall. That same year he received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from the University of Leyden and assumed the professorship of divinity at that school. "One of the first observations of Arminius, after entering on the duties of his chair, was that the students were much more given to scholastic subtleties and disputations than to the thorough study of Scripture. He determined to cure this evil." His chief goal in teaching divinity, therefore, was the commendable task of leading his students away from unprofitable squabbles about man-made philosophy and theology ("crabbed questions and the cumbrous mass of scholastic assertions") and to encourage them to study and depend upon the Bible alone. Arminius's ever-present enemies, though, attempted constantly to disrupt his ministry. One of his warmest adversaries was his uncle, who was a rector of the theological faculty. "Preachers attacked him from the pulpit as a Pelagian, and worse than a Pelagian." A national synod was demanded to settle the disputes, but before it could be held, Arminius died of a disease he had contracted eight months before. "His death was most painful; and to bodily pain was added mental anguish at the misrepresentations of his religious opinions and of his personal character made by his embittered foes."

Today the term "Arminian" is loosely and commonly applied to those who emphasize the sinner's ability to receive or reject Christ and who believe Christians can lose their salvation, but Arminius himself did not teach the latter. SOME CONTEND THAT IF A CHRISTIAN IS NOT A CALVINIST, HE MUST BE AN ARMINIAN. THIS IS NOT TRUE. IT IS POSSIBLE TO BE NEITHER ARMINIAN NOR CALVINIST, BUT SIMPLY TO BE BIBLICAL! Calvin and Arminius were fallible men who attempted to describe biblical truth in a systematic theology. We do not have to choose between them. The only infallible source for faith and practice is the infallible Bible itself, not some fallible man's systematic interpretation of it. I AM NEITHER A CALVINIST NOR AN ARMINIAN; AND I REFUSE TO ALLOW PEOPLE TO FORCE ME INTO EITHER MOLD. I believe in secure eternal life for the born again believer because it is what many clear passages of Scripture teach, not because it is what Calvin believed. I reject all five points of Calvinism as they are commonly interpreted today. As for

Arminius, he was not sure if a believer could lose his salvation. He did not take a clear position either way. He did not believe a sinner could receive Christ apart from the grace and miracle-working power of God.

The following views of Arminius on the doctrine of predestination and grace are drawn up almost entirely in words that may be found in his writings --

ARTICLE I -- That God, by an eternal, unchangeable purpose in Jesus Christ, his Son, before the foundation of the world, hath determined, out of the fallen, sinful race of men, to save in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, shall believe on this his Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end; and, on the other hand, to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath, and to condemn them as alienate from Christ, according to the word of the Gospel in John 3:36: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him," and according to other passages of Scripture also.

ARTICLE II -- That, agreeably thereto, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption, and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins, except the believer, according to the word of the Gospel of John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"; and in the First Epistle of John 2:2: "And he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

ARTICLE III -- That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free-will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do anything that is truly good (such as having faith eminently is); but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good, according to the word of Christ, John 15:5: "Without me ye can do nothing."

ARTICLE IV -- That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without that prevenient or assisting, awakening, following, and co-operative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil; so that all good deeds or movements that can be conceived must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But, as respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible, inasmuch as it is written concerning many that they have resisted the Holy Ghost, -- Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places.

ARTICLE V -- That those who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith, and have thereby become partakers of his life-giving spirit, have thereby full power to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh, and to win the victory, it being well understood that it is ever through the assisting grace of the Holy Ghost; and that Jesus Christ assists them through his Spirit in all temptations, extends to them his hand; and if only they are ready for the conflict, and desire his help, and are not inactive, keeps them from falling, so that they, by no craft or power of Satan, can be misled, nor plucked out of Christ's hands, according to the word of Christ, John 10:28: "Neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." But whether these very persons cannot, by their own negligence, desert the commencement of their being in Christ, and embrace again the present world, fall back from the holy doctrine once committed to them, make shipwreck of their conscience, and fall from grace; this must be more fully examined and weighed by the Holy Scripture before men can teach it with full tranquility of mind and confidence. (M'Clintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 1895, Vol. I).

Thus we see that Arminius was not certain about whether a child of God could turn away from Christ and be lost again. He left that matter for further study, but he died at age 49 before he formed a conviction one way or the other about eternal security. Some of his followers modified Arminius's position and plainly taught that salvation can be lost.

For further research, see the doctrinal studies in the WAY OF LIFE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE BIBLE & CHRISTIANITY. This hard cover Bible Encyclopedia contains 560 pages (8.5X11) of information, over 5,500 entries, and over 6,000 cross references. Almost twenty-five years of research have gone into this one-of-a-kind reference tool. It is the only Bible dictionary/ encyclopedia that is written by a Fundamental Baptist and based strictly upon the King James Bible. It is a complete dictionary of biblical terminology and also features many other areas of research not often covered in Bible reference volumes. Subjects include Bible versions, Denominations, Cults, Christian Movements, Typology, the Church, Social Issues and Practical Christian Living, Bible Prophecy, and Old English Terminology. The Christian will be helped and fortified in his faith through this Bible Encyclopedia. This work does not correct the Authorized Version of the Bible, nor does it undermine the fundamental Baptist's doctrines and practices as many study tools do. The 2nd Edition (January 1998) contains roughly 1,250 new entries and additions to existing entries. Many preachers have told us that apart from Strong's Concordance, the Way of Life Bible Encyclopedia is their favorite study tool. A missionary told us recently that if he could save only one study book out of his library, it would be our Encyclopedia. An evangelist in South Dakota wrote: "If I were going to the mission field and could carry only three books, they would be the Strong's concordance, a hymnal, and the Way of Life Bible Encyclopedia." Missionary author Jack Moorman says: "The encyclopedia is excellent and will meet a real need. The entries show a 'distilled spirituality.'" Burgundy hard cover book. Special direct order single copy price is \$29.95 + \$4 S/H.

U.S.A. AND FOREIGN

1701 Harns Rd., Oak Harbor, Washington 98277

360-675-8311 (voice) (360-240-8347 (fax) (fbns@wayoflife.org (e-mail), <http://wayoflife.org/~dcloud> (web site)

CANADA ONLY

Bethel Baptist Church, 4212 Campbell St. N., London, Ontario N6P 1A6 (519-652-2619 (voice)
(519-652-0056 (fax), Bethel.Baptist@sympatico.ca (e-mail)